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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [RS](#) [GG](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS HOST
CONFERENCE ON RUSSIA-GEORGIA CONFLICT

Classified By: Pol-Econ Chief Rob Garverick for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶11. (C) Summary: The Azerbaijan National Committee for European Integration (ANCEI) hosted a conference entitled "The Russia - Georgia Conflict and Its Security, Economic, and Humanitarian Implications" in Baku on September 29. During the first panel on international security in the aftermath of the conflict, commentators argued that the political status quo in the South Caucasus has been shattered. Azerbaijani political analyst Leila Alieva argued that at least in the short term, the conflict will force the three South Caucasus states to be more cautious in adopting a pro-Western foreign policy and will cool any impulse for reform. The second panel suggested that Russia's response was premeditated and excessive. Georgia, Azerbaijan and Russia were said to have lost economically due to the conflict, while the latter also lost politically on the international stage. During the third panel on humanitarian and civil society concerns, commentators reported that there is a lack of data on casualties and infrastructure damage so it is still difficult to grasp the toll of the conflict. Despite this confusion, the vast majority of Azerbaijan's civil society organizations support Georgia's claims to territorial integrity. End Summary.

Background

¶12. (SBU) The Azerbaijan National Committee for European Integration (ANCEI) hosted a conference entitled "The Russia - Georgia Conflict and Its Security, Economic, and Humanitarian Implications" in Baku on September 29. (NOTE: ANCEI is a loose-knit organization of approximately 50 Azerbaijani intellectuals who analyze Azerbaijan's relations with the EU. ANCEI favors Azerbaijan's pro-Western foreign policy orientation.) Approximately 70 people attended, including political commentators, NGO representatives, and journalists from Azerbaijan, Russia, and Georgia. The German, Georgian, and Italian Ambassadors attended, but diplomatic representation was minimal. The event was funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

Opening Address

¶13. (SBU) German Ambassador Stanchina delivered the opening address. Stanchina said the conflict has shaken the status quo within the South Caucasus; the war also underscores the need for regional cooperation and integration. Stanchina threw out several unanswered questions, wondering whether

Russia is the only regional state that can provide security in the region and what the West can do to enhance security. Stanchina observed that the conflict demonstrated that "irresponsible Russian behavior" in the region would not lead to Western military involvement, as the West is not willing to risk a war with Russia. Commenting on Azerbaijan's security challenges, Stanchina said the best way for Azerbaijan to increase security cooperation with Western states is to become a full democracy.

Panel One: International Relations and Security

¶4. (SBU) Azerbaijani political analyst Leila Alieva argued that the status quo within the South Caucasus has been shattered. The three regional states must now face the question of whether to be more cautious or proactive in seeking Euro-Atlantic integration. Alieva said the region's movement toward the EU and NATO will slow, alongside a cooling of political and economic reforms. The conflict has showed that Russia is the decisive actor within the South Caucasus, and it faces little restraints in using any tools -- diplomatic, economic, military, etc. -- to pursue its goals. Alieva suggested Russia's invasion could open a Pandora's Box of challenges for Moscow in dealing with some of its own minorities. Echoing a common theme, Alexandr Russetski of the Helsinki Commission said the status quo of the South Caucasus' "frozen conflicts" should no longer be acceptable to the international community.

¶5. (SBU) Russian analyst Maksim Sevchenko's pro-Russian and anti-U.S. comments sharply contrasted with the broader tone

of the conference. Sevchenko argued that Georgia is to blame for the war because it was the aggressor, and that Russia had been a "victim" to the intervention of outside powers. Sevchenko urged the three South Caucasus states to learn from the probable tripartite division of Iraq as a lesson that Western interventions launched under the guise of "democracy-building" promote instability. Sevchenko also stated that Russia's core security interests would be threatened by the South Caucasus states joining a foreign military block (i.e. NATO) or allowing a foreign military base to be established in the neighborhood. Finally, Sevchenko emphasized at several points that Azerbaijan is a reliable partner for Russia and there are no substantive bilateral problems.

¶6. (SBU) Azerbaijani political analyst Rasim Musabayov said the GOAJ's low profile assistance to Georgia during the conflict was "adequate." The Azerbaijani position is based on the need to support Georgia, while avoiding spoiling relations with Russia. Caucasus International Crisis Group Director Lawrence Sheets argued that Russia has managed to "shift the goalposts" vis-a-vis Georgia by limiting European monitors access to only the Russian "buffer zones," and disallowing the monitors to access South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Azerbaijani political commentator Zardusht Alizadeh ruled out the prospects for Russia duplicating a "Georgia scenario" in Azerbaijan, suggesting that Azerbaijani-Russian relations are on a good footing.

Panel Two: International Relations and Security (continued)

¶7. (SBU) The second panel largely reiterated key points of the first panel. Georgia analyst David Smith argued that Russia's key objectives were to unseat Georgian President Saakashvili, derail Georgia's bid to join NATO, and to destroy the country's military and economy. Vakhtang Kolbaya identified the conflict as Russia's first step to reassert its power by dividing and controlling Georgia. Maksim Sevchenko countered that anyone born in the former USSR can apply for Russian citizenship and that its citizens will be defended by force, if necessary. Georgian Ambassador Nikoloz Natbiladze called for an international investigation into the outbreak of the conflict. Natbiladze stressed that Russia's response was not that of a peacekeeper, but of an

invading force intent on punishing Georgia. While urging that dialogue was needed with Russia, he said it is untenable as long as Russia used double standards when defining the status of breakaway regions.

Panel Three: Humanitarian Problems and Civil Society

¶8. (SBU) Arzu Abdullayeva of Azerbaijan's Helsinki Citizens Assembly represented the views of many panelists. She claimed the majority of civil society organizations in Azerbaijan supported Georgia in the conflict, as the disruption of its territorial integrity was illegal. As noted by Russian humanitarian aid worker Varvara Pakhomenko, inadequate access to the buffer zones and the rampant spread of fabricated stories have exacerbated the problem of gaining accurate information. Several of the panelists emphasized the importance of establishing an information center to get accurate and timely reports out to all interested parties. Mamuka Kuparadze lamented that the Georgian government offered no indication of its intentions to launch the initial strikes against separatists, so civil society organizations in the country were unable to warn civilians of the impending danger. As a result of the conflict, over 68,000 refugees have been unable to return to their homes in the buffer zones.

¶9. (U) Conference Participants Included:

Panel One:

Leila Alieva, Azerbaijani political analyst
Alexandr Russetski, Chairman of the Georgian Helsinki Commission; Chairman of the South Caucasus Regional Security Institute
Maksim Sevchenko, Commissioner for the Russian Federation Public Chamber Commission on Ethnic Relations and Freedom of Conscience; Member of the Center for Strategic Studies of Religion and Politics of the Modern World
Rasim Musabayov, Azerbaijani political analyst

Lawrence Sheets, Caucasus Director for the International Crisis Group

Zardusht Alizadeh, Azerbaijani political analyst
Malkhaz Gulashvili, President of the "Georgian Times"

Panel Two:

David Smith, Director of the Georgian Security Analysis Center, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies;
Togrul Juvarli, Professor and political scientist at Turan Information Agency;
Vakhtang Kolbaya, Director of the Research Center for Development of Georgian-Turkish Relations;
Ingilab Ahmedov, Director of the Monitoring Centre;
Vahktang Dzhanashiya, Chief Editor and Political Scientist of Russian television channel ORT-1

Panel Three:

Irada Bagirova, Department Head of the Caucasus History Department at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences;
Varvara Pakhomenko, Human rights defender and representative for a Russian human rights organization;
Mamuka Kuparadze, Director of Studio Re, a Georgian non-governmental organization;
Bruce Grant, Professor at the University of New York;
Avaz Hasanov, President of the Society for Human Research;
Guram Odisharia, Writer for Caucasian Dialogue, a Georgian non-governmental organization